

Why Poetry?

Dartmoor inspires a pandemic project

by Professor Sarah Kember

As a sixth former at Southway Comprehensive School, I already knew that English, specifically poetry, was my thing. I had a good English teacher, Mr Wilkins, who introduced me to Yeats and Eliot, Thom Gunn and Ted Hughes, working through a copy of George MacBeth's Poetry 1900-1965. I still have this (oops) covered in annotations, written in indecipherably small handwriting. It remains one of the most important books on my shelf.

In an eclectic mix of English, Biology and Geography A level, it was Biology I worked hardest at, and struggled with the most. One day, during a lab class close to my mocks, I walked out, leaving everything but my packed lunch and made my way, by foot, onto the moors. I went past Dousland, where my Nan lived, onto Yennadon Down. I gave my lunch to a pony and sat looking at the reservoir, and soaking my senses in the colours, smells and unique feel of this much loved place.

My relationship with Dartmoor is not only contemplative. I played there as a child, tobogganing in winter, picnicking in summer. I did Ten Tors twice and my friends and family still groan when I tell my tale of burst blisters, bloodied boots and heroism. When I was at Oxford, studying English, I would regularly jump into



my Ford Anglia and drive (55 mph max, with a following wind) down to Plymouth so that I could visit my Mum, my Nan and the moors, probably not in that order.

I live in Brighton now, and the South Downs, however lovely, are no match for the moors. I was there in February, standing on top of Sheepstor, leaning in to a wind that cleared the sky and nearly swept my feet. I have always enjoyed the rough and tumble physicality of being on Dartmoor. Its rough edge can seem familiar, but is not to be underestimated.

In September, I came down with a new purpose. As a writer, as well as academic and publisher (I work at Goldsmiths, University of London), I've been engaged in a project to get poems into public places. The main rationale for this is that I believe poems are a public good. We need them now, more than ever. They

Dartmoor

Granite-bodied ancestor
flesh turned peat and lichen-spotted skin
dotted with mossy damask regrowth
eccentric outcrop
of gorse brow
reed hair
grass tuft

Here and there
fluid leaks from your circulatory system
brackish oedema

You have been standing for so long
to embrace
all offspring
not just your own

There is no question of gender
generosity
the harshness of your love
for each lone harrier, skylark, crow
Greyface, Whiteface, Blackface

I have been coming for so long
to scramble up
lean against you
sit beside bent trees
scarred sentinels
of souls that seek you
senses fill you
spirits implore you
in your majesty of mottled brown-backed
marshland
woodland
moorland
turned golden by a wind-swept, ageing sun

Stay standing
for as long as our time takes

distil, and help us process experience in a way that is important because it connects our inner worlds with the world around us. It's pretty obvious that right now, we

have a lot of processing to do and 'we' includes teachers, parents and children.

In March, at the start of lockdown, I went for a walk with my partner in a neighbourhood that was eerily quiet. Nobody had even started to think through life and living in a global pandemic. We were still in shock, culturally and individually: calm on the outside perhaps, but fearful, inevitably. We passed a local school and were drawn to the fence where the children had posted drawings and messages of support to their community. It was a bright, colourful and heartening display that I felt compelled to respond to.

When You Go Back is my response to the children of Lancing Prep. It is illustrated in order to enhance its appeal and accessibility. It is dedicated to my young nieces and is being used in schools all over the country to talk about poetry, the pandemic and, I hope, the important role of

children and young people in our immediate future. I must admit that at the start of the crisis I wanted to help in more obvious ways. I signed up as an NHS Volunteer and for first aid training with the Red Cross and St John Ambulance. I'm not a keyworker and I felt relatively useless until someone reminded me of what I already knew: poetry and the arts in general can have a huge impact on people's lives. They not only deal with the past and present, but also help us imagine a better future. I made space for this in my poem and look forward to school workshops in which I'll be encouraging children to write their own.

Poetry captures time and place in different ways, and



can combine locality, physicality, spirituality, and even transcendence. I knew my Dartmoor poem needed to do all of that. It was daunting. Most importantly, I had to do justice to my own, longstanding relationship with Dartmoor. ■

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s.kember@gold.ac.uk
www.sarah-kember.com/poetry.html